

Statement of  
Denise Rolark Barnes  
Publisher, The Washington Informer

before the

Joint Economic Committee  
United States Congress

Thursday, September 24, 2009

**"The Future of Newspapers: The Impact on the Economy and Democracy."**

Room 210 of the Cannon House Office Building

10:00 A.M.

Thank you Madam chair and members of the Joint Economic Committee for the opportunity on "The Future of Newspapers: The Impact on the Economy and Democracy." I salute you for your interest in hearing from a diverse group of newspaper publishers regarding our struggles and how this very unique piece of legislation might impact the future the of the newspaper industry.

As you heard in my introduction, my name is Denise Rolark Barnes, and I succeeded my father, Dr. Calvin W. Rolark, as publisher of The Washington Informer when he died in 1994. He and his colleagues in the Black Press impressed upon me the role and responsibility of the Black Press which was founded by two freedmen, Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russworm, publishers of the country's first black newspaper established in New York City in 1827.

Freedom's Journal was published nearly 123 years after the nation's first continuously published newspaper was established in Boston, Massachusetts in 1707, and nearly 40 years before the U.S. Congress abolished slavery in America in 1865.

The Wisconsin Historical Society describes Freedom's Journal as a newspaper that provided *"international, national, and regional information on current events and contained editorials declaiming slavery, lynching, and other injustices. Freedom's Journal circulated in 11 states, the District of Columbia, Haiti, Europe, and Canada."*

Russworm and Cornish wrote in their very first editorial to their readers, "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us." The paper published for only two years due to a lack of advertising support, but it laid the foundation for thousands of

newspapers who shared a mission and purpose that was no different than their white counterparts – to provide clear and truthful information about the actions of those who we put in charge and to provide a voice for those who are effected by their actions.

Ten years ago, I could confidently say that the National Newspaper Publishers Association, the trade association serving the Black press, had a membership of more than 200 African American newspapers. Today, attendance at conventions indicates a drastic decline in the number of papers that currently exist, possibly half.

The Washington Informer has also joined ranks with publishers of other community and metropolitan ethnic newspapers that serve a targeted audience who are also exploring ways to keep their papers alive and viable during these difficult economic times.

The one thing we all share in common our dependence on advertising. As my dad use to say, “Advertising is the lifeblood of every newspaper and circulation is the necessary evil.”

Minority or ethnic newspapers have always experienced a recession when it comes to advertising. We are rarely top of mind when it comes to ad placements made by advertising agencies, nor are we treated equitably when it comes advertisers accepting and paying our rates.

Our operations are small, our reporters cover a broad range of issues, often for little or no pay, and the quality of our publications suffers due to our inability to hire editors to fact-check and clean-up copy before it goes to print. Yet, the demand from our readers is growing. They remind us daily of how much we are needed to address their particular issues and concerns that are often ignored by the mainstream media, issues such as health disparities, housing and employment discrimination, racial profiling and immigration issues, to name a few.

While I applaud Congresswoman Maloney, Senator Cardin and members of this committee’s intentions to address the growing crisis that is affecting the entire newspaper industry, I view the legislation before us as just one step towards fixing a problem that is steadily getting worse. I would suggest, however, that since there are no daily African American newspapers, that you broaden the language in the bill to include weekly publications. Also, the term “general circulation” which is often used to exclude minority and ethnic newspapers, should be broadened to ensure greater opportunities for equal

access to advertising revenue under the legislation.

I appreciate the fact that you are considering a different kind of business model that is reportedly being pursued by some newspapers. It also suggests you may be open to consider other options that may prove effective, as well.

What papers like ours need is legislation that will end discrimination on the part of advertising agencies as it relates to ad purchasing in minority-owned media, and that promotes diversity in advertising agency's hiring and promotion practices.

We need to run our businesses on a level playing field. Whether we are a for-profit or non-profit entity, the decision-makers need to be incentivized to do business with minority and ethnic-owned media, or else, for us, there will be no end to this recession.

This country must maintain a free and independent press that serves all of the people and as you consider the options, this must be foremost in your minds.

I am open to taking your questions and sharing more of my experiences, thoughts and suggestions if needed.

Once again, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today.